

Sangita's Journey Through Teaching

As I write this, I am in the midst of the last two months of my sixth year teaching third grade. Even after these many years, I am happy to say there are still a million new things for me to try and learn. Many of these are things—simple truths—that my students have taught me throughout the years.

Each day, each child, each subject brings with it an immense number of variables and possibilities. To me, this is what makes teaching so amazing, yet so daunting. Teaching cannot be scripted. Quite to the contrary, even the best planned teachers have to “wing it,” each and every day because of the nature of our jobs. During my first two years, I focused most of my energy on classroom management and lesson planning. I wanted to avoid discipline problems and find creative ways to impart information to my students. Of course, problems would arise. Many times not knowing what else to do, I often let my students talk things out. I remember always being amazed at how well they could verbalize their emotions, intentions, and reactions. The way they talked—explaining their choices and reasoning with each other—was far better than any random punishment or reward I could dole out as a teacher.

Academically, I was also mesmerized by them. During my second year, I remember looking over at two of my students- Patrick and Andre. Patrick, a strong reader, was reading to Andre, one of my struggling readers. They were hunched over a book together, sitting knee to knee. Andre sounded out the words as Patrick coached him. Then Patrick re-read what Andre had just tried to read so that he understood the story. Then they talked about a chunk of pages at a time, laughing and relating it to their own lives. This scene, which I'm sure occurs a thousand times over in classrooms everywhere, sticks out in my mind for one main reason...mainly because I did not ask my students to do this. It was independent reading time. They were supposed to be reading, and Patrick and Andre were doing just that, except it was in a way that was better than I could have ever planned. It just seemed so natural and simple to them.

As I've grown as an educator, I've realized there are a few things that are this simple: children must have the space to make choices in our classrooms. They need to talk and share and learn from one another. For me, giving my students the power to choose is a non-negotiable; it is also the underpinning of my beliefs about community. I do not mean to make this sound easy. During the last three years, in my classroom in Brooklyn, I have had to work hard to build communities that reflect, infuse, and celebrate the power of choice. Each year I have facilitated the building of these communities a little differently. Each year, I think I get a little better at it; each year, I also envision how much better it can be the next year! This is predominantly because each and every year, my students have risen to the challenge. They have shown me that I am not the only teacher in the classroom. I am not the only one responsible for managing the classroom or resolving problems. NOW I watch my students talk about race and prejudice, plan social action projects, and talk through problems during community meetings. Because I have given them the space to make smart choices... they do.

I could not have taught or even expected these things in my first few years of teaching. Building a community of learners that are able to make smart choices—big and small-- is a slow and careful process, for teachers and students. It cannot happen over night. And there are always struggles. However, the rewards are exponential. In classrooms that have communities that work, there is an unexplainable growth in the children; a feeling that we're all in this together. With all of the pressure, anxieties, and demands of teaching, we have to recruit, invest, and trust that our students can and will make positive choices for themselves and their classmates.